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What is the value of official statistics and how do we communicate that value?

Ways to motivate respondents through communication of the value of official statistics

Prepared by Statistics Sweden

Summary

This paper focuses on the ways of conveying the value of official statistics in the communication with respondents of statistical surveys. Understanding the value of official statistics is motivating for respondents, but so far this issue is not very much reflected in the data collection process. Good communication with respondents contributes to the efficiency of data collection processes. After the introduction of Sweden's Language Act in 2009, Statistics Sweden has focussed more on plain language, that is, to adapt the language to the intended audience. The approach is now being implemented also with respondents in order to improve communication. New ways of collaboration are needed to achieve improvements.

The paper is presented for discussion to the Conference of European Statisticians seminar on "What is the value of official statistics and how do we communicate that value?"

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I. Introduction

1. Communicating the value of official statistics is important for every national statistics institute (NSI), not only in dialogue with users of statistics but also in conversations with survey respondents. Explaining the value of official statistics can play an important part in the success of the data collection process. Aiming to improve the language used in the data collection process and communication with respondents is not new at Statistics Sweden. Obviously, great care is put into the survey design and construction of forms, including issues related to language. However, communication professionals in the Swedish language have so far not been involved in other parts of data collection, such as in drafting letters, e-mails and instructions.

A. A new way of communicating with respondents

2. Statistics Sweden has established a new approach for communicating with respondents in the data collection process. This approach focusses on explaining the value of official statistics to the respondents. A cross-departmental network has been created to work methodically to improve written communication related to the participation in surveys, i.e. introduction letters, instructions, reminders and e-services (electronic forms). The data collection process is of course very complex and involves various tasks such as finding phone numbers, phoning respondents at the right time, organising support to them, formulating survey questions and informing about statistical methodology. Communication is but a small part in the process but can affect the success of the data collection process, hopefully by increasing the response rates. The cross-departmental network is an important tool towards the overall goal to reduce the problem with non-response.

B. Explaining the value of official statistics to motivate respondents

3. Members of the cross-departmental network who are in direct contact with respondents share the following observation: When respondents understand their role in the system of official statistics they are more willing to participate in data collection. The crucial dialogue for transmitting this understanding often takes place on the phone when the respondent calls the statistical office to ask to be excluded from the survey or when the statistical office calls them to remind and persuade them to participate. Through close collaboration between communication experts and those who are directly in contact with respondents, Statistics Sweden explores ways to use make better use of existing knowledge of the behaviour of respondents. This knowledge needs to be incorporated to the different communication channels used (the website, e-mails, letters, brochures etc.) more efficiently to motivate respondents to take part in the surveys.

C. Example of how the value of official statistics can be explained

4. Figure 1 below shows an example of how the staff of Statistics Sweden communicates the value of official statistics and explains the statistical system to the respondents of surveys in the business sector. Similar explanations are also used on a regular basis by phone interviewers in surveys for individuals and households to motivate the respondent to accept participation. The goal would be to communicate the value of official statistics already before the first phone call, in the invitation letters and on the website. The goal is to communicate successfully from the first contact onwards instead of relying, as is often the case today, on e-mails or phone conversations later in the data

collection process. This would help to avoid "repairing" the communication in invitation letters when it has already been unsuccessful in motivating the respondents, both in optional and compulsory surveys. The following explains the flow of the conversation presented in figure 1:

(a) Respondent's company (bottom): A company that runs a factory reports data to Statistics Sweden;

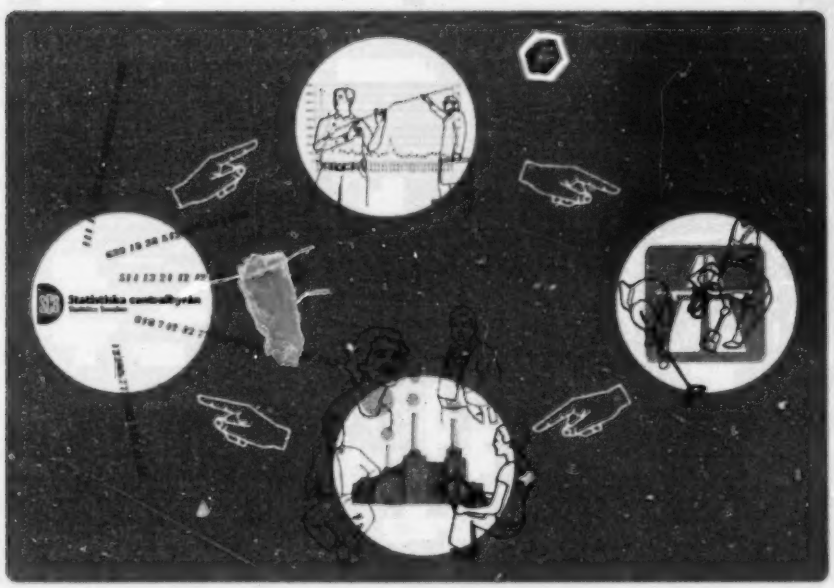
(b) Statistics Sweden (left): Statistics Sweden refines data into statistics and makes statistics available to decision makers;

(c) Decision makers (top): Decision makers use statistics to decide where to build roads;

(d) Road builders (right): As a result of the decisions based on statistics, a road is built that leads to the respondent's factory;

(e) Respondent's company again (bottom): Thanks to the new road, the factory can transport its products to customers more easily.

Figure 1.
Example of how the statistical system and the value of official statistics can be explained to respondents



D. The Language Act

5. In 2009, Sweden's Language Act was enacted. Among other things, it states that the language of the public sector is to be "cultivated, simple and comprehensible". This means that government agencies need to:

- follow rules and recommendations from the Language Council and other government agencies on spelling, grammar, punctuation, sentence structure etc.,
- write as simple as possible, e.g. by avoiding complicated sentence structure and explaining specialist terminology or jargon,

- adapt the language to the intended readers by considering, e.g. their reading ability and previous knowledge of the topic.

II. Setting up a network: better communication through collaboration

6. Statistics Sweden has found a way to start working towards improved communication with respondents, including a better way of communicating the value of official statistics. In early 2013, Statistics Sweden set up a network for that purpose.

A. Aim and task

7. The network's task is to evaluate the communication with respondents: e-mails, paper letters as well as web contents and suggest improvements. The aim is to bring together the people who are involved in the data collection process, including respondents. To apply the plain language principles and fulfil the Language Act, the knowledge about the intended reader needs to be combined with the purpose of the message to be sent out.

8. The network is the first phase of changing the way Statistics Sweden communicates with the respondents. It is obvious that it requires reorganising the internal communication work at the statistical office. The network is certainly an excellent way for the Communication Department of Statistics Sweden to learn more about the operations in the data collection process from a communication perspective. Based on the expertise and experience of the members of the network, the activities are now focusing on two surveys: living conditions surveys (SILC) and the survey on short-term statistics, wages and salaries for the private sector.

B. Members

9. The network consists of nine key persons involved in the communication with respondents in various ways. There are two trained communication professionals as network coordinators: a plain language expert and a web strategist, both from the Communication Department. Six members work at the two data collection departments with text creation and support to the respondents by e-mail. The ninth member is from the Process Department which is in charge of common routines and processes. The Process Department also creates templates for letters which form an important part of the communication with respondents. The department also has experts in constructing and testing forms, setting up guidelines for surveys and giving advice in those fields.

C. Benefits

10. The process of text creation and editing for the various written communications of the data collection process is decentralised and complex. It involves many writers and editors, as well as other stakeholders at different departments within Statistics Sweden. As a consequence, texts are often created one by one, independently for different uses. From the reader's perspective however, each individual text is a link in *one* communication chain from *one* sender, i.e. Statistics Sweden. The network is a new approach at Statistics Sweden, since it works with the whole communication chain; every letter, web text, e-mail etc. in the communication chain is considered by the network.

11. The main benefit of the network is that it mobilises knowledge that already exists in the organisation about the data collection process and respondents. This knowledge is crucial for the creation of successful communication and therefore, it needs to be identified and transferred to the right place in the data collection process so that it can be put to use. This does not happen automatically; the network is a way of making it happen.

12. Finally, the network also provides an excellent opportunity for the Communication Department to introduce colleagues at other departments to the theory and practice of plain language.

D. Plain language principles

13. The activities of the network are based on plain language methodology. Context and the reader's perspective are at the heart of plain language. According to plain language principles, the key to successful communication is to consider the whole communication chain, not individual texts. At each link of the chain, you put yourself in the reader's position and ask "What does the reader want and need to know here?". Guided by the web strategist and the plain language specialist, the members of the network draw on their own experience to find the answers to questions like:

- What is our core message to the respondents with this particular text?
- What do we want to achieve with our letters, e-mails and web contents?
- What are the respondents' attitudes towards us and how we want them to react?

14. The network helps to establish new ways of collaboration, and also provides an opportunity for the Communications Department to teach plain language in an easy way to the colleagues outside their department. The aim is to inspire the members to find their own drive to change the way Statistics Sweden communicates.

III. Issues and challenges

A. Communication is a core task of statistical offices

15. Communication is a central task of the statistical system – statistical production and dissemination. In order to succeed with their mission, NSIs must allocate the necessary resources to this task including sufficient competence in communication (e.g. in plain language). Much of the focus in data collection has been on survey design and legal issues. The role of the Communication Department has been limited to things such as responsibility for general guidelines for web publishing and giving language advice to authors. So far, except for translation to English, the Communication Department has not actively worked with the letter templates, or the actual composition of letters, web texts etc. The cross-departmental network at Statistics Sweden is a way to address the communication challenge more holistically.

16. The core activities of NSIs are of course to produce and disseminate statistics. Traditionally, Communication Departments largely concentrate their efforts to dissemination. However, the Communication Department at Statistics Sweden is getting more and more involved today in the production process as well, particularly in the dialogue with respondents. It is fair to say that communication is an integrated component of the core activities of a modern NSI.

B. The need to evaluate

17. Plain language is an established and well documented method for creating effective communication. (See "Working for dollars, working to please" by Joseph Kimble, Carolina Academic Press 2012, for real life examples of positive results of plain language from the public sector around the world.) However, a major challenge for Statistics Sweden will be to evaluate the effects of efforts towards using plain language with respondents, including explaining the value of official statistics to them. The plain language principles are rather simple; but applying them, for example, defining the purpose and target audience of a text can often be quite complicated. This in turn demands extensive collaboration. The same level of collaboration is also needed for testing, evaluating and interpreting the results and then taking the proper action based on the findings.

C. Spread the collaboration

18. The biggest challenge in the near future is to find ways to increase collaboration and involve more staff members in the work towards improved communication. Thanks to the network, a group of nine people is devoted to improving communication with respondents. Consequently, this group has acquired skills in plain language. However, the main point of the network is not to create a small group of specialists. The end goal is, instead, to inspire and support everyone involved in dialogue with respondents. The goal is to create long term changes, step by step. Identifying cross-sectional benefits and creating templates (i.e. models) that can be used in many surveys will be important in further work. No matter how successful the network has been, it will not be a success in the long run unless its goals spread among staff members.

19. Data collection departments have acquired new skills in plain language that gives them new tools to identify problems in the communication with respondents. But most importantly, they are now able to develop the communications with respondents in practice. This development should be spread among staff members. That is a prerequisite for long term improvements in the way Statistics Sweden communicates the value of official statistics to respondents. There are several important questions related to this:

(a) First, how to preserve and develop what has been achieved in terms of new knowledge and interest among the network members from the data collection departments and the Process Department?;

(b) Second, what groups, especially cross-departmental or interdisciplinary, already exist that could be used to continue to spread this new way of communicating that the network has introduced?

(c) Third, what other groups of staff members need to be involved?

D. Explore other methods

20. Statistics Sweden needs to work more actively to find out more about respondents and what the value of official statistics is to them. Plain language is one way, but there are other methods of creating a better dialogue between statisticians and respondents that should be explored. One such method is service design, a methodology for improving the service by organising the communication, the material components and the people involved in a better way. Service design can provide means for learning more about respondents in order to gain in-depth knowledge about their needs and attitudes. This can give important clues about ways to motivate respondents.

IV. Conclusions and recommendations

A. Knowledge mobilisation

21. The network described here is an important contribution to knowledge mobilisation. It is a way to make better use of knowledge regarding plain language, the data collection process and respondents. This knowledge is crucial to successful communication, but it is not often available in the right place or right time. Meanwhile the network helps to improve the way Statistics Sweden communicates. This work has already shown that by explaining the value of official statistics better statistical offices can help to motivate respondents to take part in surveys.

B. Plain language

22. We do not yet know how much can be achieved with plain language methods to communicate the value of official statistics to respondents but it is a path that needs to be pursued. Improving the communication with our respondents is one way to reduce the accelerating rate of non-response. Using plain language helps Statistics Sweden to communicate the value of official statistics in a successful, effective way. The same approach, plain language, is important in all communications of statistical offices.

C. Collaboration among national statistical offices

23. Statistics Sweden has managed to establish collaboration across departments in support of data collection and the results are promising. Another welcome development would be more collaboration among NSIs to discuss ways to improve communication with the respondents and the way we as statistics producers explain the value of official statistics.